

SOLO MISSION

We caught up with director Ron Howard and the cast of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* in LA to get the lowdown on the latest *Star Wars* spin-off film. Words Gill Pringle

Alden Ehrenreich, 28, wasn't even born when Harrison Ford first wooed audiences with his sexy space cowboy Han Solo in 1977, debuting the *Star Wars* multi-billion-dollar franchise with the since re-titled *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.

If Ehrenreich is daunted at stepping into such mighty shoes, today presenting the origin story of our young hero in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, then he's not letting on.

Plotting his course, there's no doubt that his destination is locked onto hyperdrive stardom, although he hopes to keep his cool by borrowing a few tips from his predecessor.

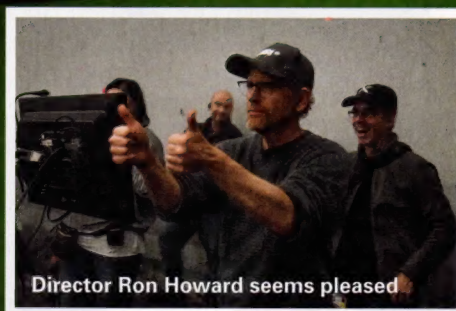
"I had lunch with Harrison right before we started shooting," says the actor, who began auditioning in October 2015 and was cast in March 2016 after six auditions. "I wanted to pay respect and he was really gracious and gave me his blessing. It felt good walking into the movie knowing I had talked to him. It would have felt wrong not to do that. We talked a lot about how he's navigated

his career and stayed very much an individualist," he says of Ford, now 75, who was seven years older than him when he first stepped into the role that would propel him to galaxies far, far away.

Nevertheless, it's impossible to not have doubts, which were suddenly put to rest just an hour before *STACK* met with Ehrenreich in Pasadena – Ford having paid an impromptu visit.

"He was so effusive about the movie, and it meant so much to me," says the actor, whose films include *Beautiful Creatures*, *Rules Don't Apply* and *Hail, Caesar!*. "It's a huge deal to have him really genuinely welcome and enjoy the film. It meant a lot to me that he took the time to come out here."

Allegedly beating out Miles



Director Ron Howard seems pleased

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”

Teller, Dave Franco, Ansel Elgort, Scott Eastwood, Taron Egerton, Logan Lerman and Jack O'Connell for the coveted role, Ehrenreich believes he may even have pierced Harrison's carbonite exterior.

"He has a certain vibe which is both charming and curmudgeonly, but he also talked about how *The Force Awakens* was a surprisingly moving experience for him, to revisit the character. So I think that underneath that gruffness there's a lot of affection for *Star Wars*."

Sliding effortlessly into Billy Dee Williams' original role of Lando Calrissian is the supremely suave Donald Glover, who feels slightly less pressure given that he is possibly the coolest dude on Earth today. And the multi-hyphenate writer-actor-musician-director-comedian-producer, AKA Childish Gambino, doesn't even need a cape to prove it – even if his incarnation of a young Lando boasts an entire wardrobe of them.

Originally turned on to the *Star Wars* universe by his father, Glover says: "When I heard they were making this movie, I told my agent that if they're making anything with Lando in it, I *had* to be Lando. And he was like, 'I hear you. But I don't like your odds'. That was exactly what I needed to hear."

Unfettered by Williams' earlier take on Lando, he argues, "Part of the reason we do any of this is for the process. No one wants to see an imitation."



STACK's Gill Pringle in the pilot's seat.

Nor is he flying any flags. "I don't want to be the poster for anything, I just want to be great. Humans have to label things to make sense of life but we just have to rise to the occasion of making great things. There has to be a conversation in art so we see more different types of people making whatever they want," says Glover, who voices Simba in Jon Favreau's upcoming do-over of *The Lion King*.

No stranger to blockbuster franchises, as Solo's love interest Qi'ra, *Game of Thrones* star Emilia Clarke is accustomed to playing her cards close. "She is a pretty mysterious character, we find out," she says. "You need to keep tabs on her throughout the movie. We meet her early on with Han and then they're separated. When we find her again, you can't quite figure out what happened to her during that time and where she is now."

Aided on their journey by a veteran cast including Thandie Newton, Paul Bettany, Warwick Davis, Jon Favreau and Woody Harrelson, the latter finds familiar territory. "Beckett is an easy character for me to play because he's a scoundrel," he laughs.

Addressing the elephant in the room – i.e., the late-hour replacement of Phil Lord and Chris Miller with veteran filmmaker Ron Howard – Harrelson adds: "Larry and Jonathan Kasdan wrote an extraordinary script and, just at the right time, Ron came in and did his magic."

Absent of fake modesty, Howard says, "I did come into it late but it was pretty damn easy. There was a lot of work that Phil and Chris had already done and, unfortunately, there were creative differences

and they weren't going to carry on. Within that, there were many things that were really strong and worked which I wanted to keep, and other things that hadn't been done yet."

Among Howard's additions, the droid L3-37 will surely become one of *Solo's* breakout favourites – being unlike any bleeping devices the franchise has ever seen.

As Lando's co-pilot and voiced by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, L3-37 is a feminist revolutionary with a mind of her own.

"She's a self-made droid who has created herself from other droids," explains Waller-Bridge. "She's turned herself into a unique creature that's stronger and more independent. She's upbeat and funny with an agenda that is bigger than the sum of her parts. It's great to play a droid with a message."

Buckle up, baby. **S**

“When I heard they were making this movie, I told my agent ... I had to be Lando”

→ **Solo: A Star Wars Story** is in cinemas now and reviewed on page 18



Paul Bettany as Dryden Vos



JOONAS SUOTAMO

If *Solo: A Star Wars Story* explores an early romance between slave colony escapees Han Solo and Emilia Clarke's Qi'ra, then the real love story belongs to Solo and Chewbacca, forging a life-long bond in their bid for freedom.

Originally portrayed by 7' 3" actor Peter Mayhew, Chewbacca was relegated to a mere furry sidekick in earlier movies, although the iconic Wookiee warrior finally finds the spotlight in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* – marking the third *Star Wars* screen outing for dashing Finnish ex-basketball player Joonas Suotamo, 31.

"I was borderline jobless when I got this role," says Suotamo when *STACK* meets him, greeting us with a warm Wookiee embrace. "My then-girlfriend, now fiancée, has seen me go from living with my mum seven years ago to becoming Chewbacca – and now we're getting married this summer."

During a basketball scholarship in the US, Suotamo fell in love with acting, only to return to Finland with dwindling prospects.

"I felt like a loser," he says. "Instead of becoming a pro player, I did my army service and worked in various jobs, oftentimes not working." Suotamo won the role over hundreds of Wookiee wannabes, bootcamping with Mayhew and perfecting the Chewy growl. "I think I won out because of my blue eyes, height, acting experience and athleticism. A strong bond with my Cavalier King Charles spaniels also helped. I understand animals and their movement."

Mayhew proved an invaluable resource: "He told me to hold my arms like I'm carrying dumbbells," Suotamo reveals.

The pro to being so tall, he adds, is "if you ever get lost from the group, you're always seen." The con is: "It's hard to find clothes. I shop online where suitable clothing is very limited."

He doesn't hesitate when quizzed over his favourite Solo: "Alden has made it his own, and Harrison loves the fact that Alden pulled it off so magnificently."

Growing up watching *Star Wars*, Suotamo dreamed of being Luke Skywalker. "I had blond hair and wanted to fly Luke's spaceships and be heroic."

Having perfected the Chewbacca growl, he refuses to take full credit. "I lower my voice and say my lines just like Chewy would, but then they're overdubbed with bear sounds."

Spending 10-hour days in the Chewbacca suit, with industrial floor fans to keep him cool, he's not allowed to take his costume home, instead relying on his team to keep it clean "with vodka, tea-tree oil, conditioner and perfumed spray."

Predicting his place in Solo sequels, Suotamo would welcome a love interest, believing "Chewbacca is a really good guy who would take good care of his family."